

Growing In Self-Control

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In Peter's list of qualities that we need to have and abound in, he includes self-control (also translated temperance in some versions). As was the case when Peter penned his epistle, we live in a culture in which consumption and self-indulgence are viewed as inalienable human rights. Society urges us to satisfy any of our innate desires and to do so in excess. Nothing is disallowed – anything goes. In fact, there is a chain of beach resorts that are named after the Greek word for pleasure or desire: Hedonism (Gr. *hedone*). It's the exact opposite of self-control.

We tend to go overboard in many areas and exhibit a lack of self-control: eating and drinking, TV watching, emotions, spending of money, sexual behavior, etc. It's a constant battle to restrain our desires. In fact, the very concept of self-control implies the battle that takes place with a divided self. One part of us wants to indulge and be unrestrained while another part has to pull back on the reins. If we're going to grow into the type of godly person that God has designed us to be, then we must grow in our self-control.

Paul uses the analogy of athletes in describing the battle of self in 1 Cor. 9:25 – *“And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.”*

Every athlete competing at the Olympic Games in Paul's time would have been conscious of the need for both training and self-control in order to be able to compete at the highest level. The same is true of today's Olympians who will be competing over the next two weeks in Rio de Janeiro. They made it to the Olympics because they were temperate in all things. They couldn't eat just all the doughnuts and ice cream they wanted. They disciplined themselves to eat the proper foods which would help their bodies be in optimum condition. They couldn't just sleep in and be lazy when they wanted. They forced themselves to get up early and hit the gym, training for hours to become the best in their field.

In Paul's day, the Olympians won olive wreath crowns. Today, they win gold, silver, or bronze medals. But those crowns and medals perish. We're fighting for a crown that does not perish. There are eternal consequences at stake. If athletes don't exercise self-control, they miss out on a temporal crown. But if we don't exercise self-control, we'll miss out on eternal life!

Of course, we're not talking about saying “No” to that dozen Krispy Kreme doughnuts if that's an occasional splurge. While that may be unwise, eating some doughnuts isn't inherently sinful. However, there are many desires that are not inherently sinful that can become sinful when acted upon out of their proper context or when not handled rightly.

Usually, self-control is thought of in terms of our emotions or our sensual appetites. Both of those are given to us by God, and they have their proper place and usage. The battle we face is controlling them and limiting them to the way God designed. It's not that God is trying to limit our fun or that we should seek asceticism for asceticism's sake. Rather, we're being molded and

conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29) and learning to be holy as God is holy (1 Pet. 1:15-16).

That's why self-control is so important and necessary – we're growing up into all things into him who is the head – Christ (Eph. 4:15). If we don't exercise self-control and just give into whatever emotion or desire comes our way, we won't look at all like Christ! The more we control our passions, the more we grow. The more we mold our desires to be the same desires as Christ, the more like God we become.

Philo, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who lived at the time of Christ, said about self-control: "The opposite of desire is temperance, which one must endeavor, and labor, and take pains by every contrivance imaginable to acquire, as the very greatest blessing." Indeed, it is a very real struggle. But it is one that is necessary if we are to grow into the image of God.